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SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT STAFF FOR LTGEN SELVA

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TAGS: PGOV KWBG KPAO KPAL IS

SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN PRESS AND PUBLIC REACTION TO SEPTEMBER 22 TRILATERAL MEETING

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Greg Marchese
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Local press reaction to the September 22 U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian trilateral meeting in New York was largely divided along partisan lines, with pro-Hamas commentators criticizing PA negotiators for participating in the absence of a full settlement freeze, and analysts aligned with Fatah or centrist factions defending Abu Mazen for what most termed an understandable decision to bow to "U.S. pressure." Post contacts described the mood in PA political circles as disappointed, and general public reaction as ambivalent, with politicians and the general public alike skeptical about the prospect of near-term progress.

PRESS REACTION PARTISAN, FOCUSED ON PA DECISION TO ATTEND

¶2. (U) Palestinian and Arab press reaction to September 22 trilateral discussions in New York led by President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and PA President Abu Mazen fell out largely on partisan lines. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri commented on Al Jazeera that the meeting, and the remarks made by President Obama following its conclusion, represented "a tremendous failure for the peace process" and "a retreat from promises to the Palestinians." Pro-Hamas political analyst Dr. Abdel Sattar Wasem said publicly that the trilateral represented "a form of normalization of the occupation," and criticized Abu Mazen for bowing to US pressure to attend. "The United States is the party that decides," Abu Zuhri said, adding that "if the PA leadership in Ramallah decides to have an independent position, they risk losing financial support and a luxurious lifestyle."

¶3. (U) In contrast, in an editorial titled "The President is Right," centrist Ma'an News Agency Editor in Chief Nasir al-Lahham noted "the outrage from Palestinian factions on all sides opposing the prospect of our President meeting with Netanyahu without a settlement freeze. This is a natural reaction," al-Lahham commented, "and indeed a natural position to take. But since we are already in a tight spot, Abbas handled Obama's invitation as well as he could. If Palestinians refused to meet with the President of the United States, Israel would be the primary beneficiary of this rejection." Al-Lahham also expressed optimism about the U.S. role in the peace process, arguing that "Obama's administration last night launched a diplomatic assault aimed at coming up with something substantive, either a meaningful declaration or an announcement of future but unscheduled negotiations, before everyone goes home."

PUBLIC REACTION SKEPTICAL, AMBIVALENT

¶ 14. (C) A September 22 sampling of opinion among Post contacts indicated a described skeptical and ambivalent mood. Zakaria al-Qaq, al-Quds University Vice President for external affairs, criticized what he called a "game of terminology" played by PA negotiators. "The PA said no negotiations without a settlement freeze, and now (PA negotiator Saeb) Erekat is describing the trilateral as a 'meeting,' not 'negotiations,' al-Qaq said. "This change in wording does not dupe the Palestinians," he added. Pollster and political analyst Nader Said was equally critical of terminology used by the USG in its public statements, arguing that, to Palestinian ears, President Obama's call for "restraint" in, rather than a full stop to, settlement construction was evocative of "the international community urging 'restraint' when the IDF carries out atrocities and human rights violations, as in Gaza."

¶ 15. (C) Both al-Qaq and Said argued that many Palestinians believed the PA had "caved" (in al-Qaq's terms) to U.S. pressure to attend the September 22 trilateral. "People feel the PA was pressured into satisfying President Obama," said Said. "And this puts the PA in a bind." Said continued, "it seems to people that the U.S. doesn't want to pick a fight (with the Israelis). And so Fatah people are on the defensive -- all of the language they are using is defensive. Hamas is the one on the attack." With regard to public expectations of progress in the negotiations, Said was dismissive. "So much of this is formality," he said, "so much of it is ritual. People have seen all of this before,

JERUSALEM 00001716 002 OF 002

and frankly, they're not really interested."

¶ 16. (C) Walid Abu Zalaf, publisher of the al-Quds newspaper, described a "sense of disappointment" among the political class. "The Palestinian side feels let down by President Obama, who is not willing to present his own plan or road map to break the current impasse," he said. "(The USG) prefers to encourage the Mitchell track, which is clearly going nowhere because both parties cannot meet each others' conditions or expectations." Assessing the general mood, PLC member Bernard Sabella said, "Palestinians have very low expectations from this meeting. We hope this isn't the first of several ineffective summits, like we saw over the past eight years. Friends of mine say that Abbas' attendance was the right thing to do, as a gesture to Obama. But no one believes this is the beginning of a new era. I hope that this indicates the peace process is moving forward again, but I doubt the Israeli government can deliver."

MARCHESE